

Alberto Vilar: On Money and Opera

By Norman Lebrecht

LONDON, 23 May 2001 - Alberto Vilar arrives late, with a runny eye, but sounding happy. "Best opera I have ever seen," he says of the previous night's *Queen of Spades* at Covent Garden, which he paid for. Next, he is off to Glyndebourne to see Simon Rattle conduct *Fidelio*, which he also underwrote. Then it's home to New York and the Met to tick his choices for next season. Most people pay for seats at the opera. Alberto Vilar pays for the operas.

He is, buck for buck, the biggest benefactor in musical history. In four years, he has given \$225 million to opera, ballet and orchestras - and there is more to come, much more, the planned gifts dropping into our conversation like paragliders into a disaster zone. "I think everyone should give," says Vilar. "My goal is to keep this extraordinary part of my culture alive. I cannot do everything myself. I can only hope to set a standard so that other people will follow suit."

His recent bequests include \$50 million to the Kennedy Center in Washington, \$45 million to the Metropolitan Opera in New York, a \$20 million commitment to the Kirov in St Petersburg, £18 million pledged to Covent Garden, \$14 million to Los Angeles Opera, \$6.2 million to produce *Doktor Faust* and *Les Troyens* at Salzburg, **\$14.5 million to an arts centre in Beaver Creek, Colorado**, \$2 million to **La Scala's Verdi Year**, the unknown cost of a new *Tannhauser* at Bayreuth, three artistic residencies in Berlin.

But the largesse comes with tags attached. Vilar, 60, likes to see his name writ large. There is a Vilar Floral Hall at the Royal Opera House, a Vilar Grand Tier at the Met; he has also argued that donors should get bigger programme billing than composers. His high visibility has raised concerns among guardians of operatic purity, who fear that this bumptious outsider may be exerting a malign influence on their art.

The editor of Opera fanzine has accused him of tilting theatres away from radical productions. A Times columnist attacked him for failing to rescue the Albanian opera house.

The New York Times griped that he gives only to a trusted managerial elite - Joseph Volpe at the Met, Valery Gergiev at the Kirov, Placido Domingo at Los Angeles, Michael Kaiser in London and Washington and Gerard Mortier at Salzburg.

"They said I only give money to people I like," he grumbles. "You want me to give to people I hate?"

The facts of the matter are worth investigating as a paradigm of the new philanthropy that is starting to replace public funding in performing arts. Vilar's career suggests that he does not spend money without strategic forethought. Raised in Cuba and Puerto Rico, he worked in corporate finance until 1980, when he set up his own fund, Amerindo, to invest in new technologies. First-peek involvements in the likes of Microsoft, Oracle, AOL, Yahoo and eBay made him a 1990s billionaire. Amerindo today handles \$9 billion - including, in all probability, your pension fund and mine.

Deploying heavy sums can be stressful, and Vilar sought refuge in opera several nights a week. Childless and unmarried, he began spreading his fortune on the Met before branching out abroad.

"I happen to be a Cuban refugee," he says. "I landed in the States and I didn't like it. I came to Europe as a student, and it was one of those infatuations. London in the late 1960s and '70s had some of the best music. So I have been coming to Covent Garden all my life. Plus, I used to take tours from here to Russia and discovered the quality of their art."

His love of the Kirov became concrete on meeting Valery Gergiev in 1998. Vilar gave huge amounts, including \$2.5 million for Prokofiev's War and Peace. But his condition was that the work had to be seen internationally; the Met co-production cost him a further \$2 million. He also gave **Gergiev a White Nights Festival budget**. "I'm going next month. There are three new productions that are mine," he says.

In October 1998, at a Savoy dinner given by the financier/conductor Gilbert Kaplan, he sat next to Lady Rothschild, who urged him to help cash-starved Covent Garden. "So I saw [the chairman] Colin Southgate," recalls Vilar. "I don't want to say anything against him, but it really didn't go any place. He had his views, I had mine. What

really made it happen was that Michael Kaiser got involved. He understood that this had to be a relationship."

Kaiser, the former executive director at Covent Garden, offered him the unnamed Floral Hall for £10 million. When the fund-raising campaign finished £2 million short, Vilar quietly made up the deficit. He added £6 million for a young artists' programme and will give as much again to install seatback screens. When Kaiser fled ROH chaos for the placid Kennedy Center, Vilar stood by his man.

"Michael died and went straight to heaven," he laughs. "He got on a plane in London, got off at Washington and a week later he called a press conference - here's \$50 million. Nice to have." Vilar's gift was tied partly to a Kirov residency and partly to Washington Opera, run by Placido Domingo. Most of Vilar's operatic investments are strategically interlinked. All of them hinge on his empathy with a manager and their openness to his interests in new audiences, new productions and new technology.

"There's one other man that has got it coming," he reveals. Last year Vilar had been discussing a \$20 million plan for drawing younger audiences to Carnegie Hall when the chief executive, Franz Xaver Ohnesorg, quit to join Simon Rattle at the Berlin Philharmonic. "When Xaver left," says Vilar, "I called up Isaac Stern [the Carnegie president] and said, 'I'm giving nothing. I can do it in Berlin.' "

The Berlin endowment will be unveiled in the autumn, when Vilar, at the instigation of the German government, undertakes a six-city tour lecturing on European outlets for enlightened philanthropy.

If the Carnegie switch underlines his personal commitments, his brush with San Francisco Opera exposed his limitations. San Francisco was seeking a chief executive. "The chairman of the board called me," says Vilar. "He said, 'You pick your person.' I said, 'There are two, either of whom would be fabulous for the house. If you pick them, you get me too.' " Vilar nominated Sarah Billingham of the Met and Gerard Mortier of the Salzburg Festival.

"So then they pick, my God, Pamela Rosenberg," continues Vilar, referring to the former head of Stuttgart Opera. "So San Francisco now gets \$25,000 from me and Los Angeles, with

Placido, gets \$14 million. There is no question that San Francisco was in a better position [to be given the money]. But I was just being honest."

Vilar is transparent about his attempts to fix appointments; his version is confirmed without rancour by Carnegie and San Francisco board members. The man, they say ruefully, has a right to spend his money how he likes and we have the right to refuse his advice.

The more serious charge, that he pushes opera houses towards tame productions, is fiercely denied by Volpe, Kaiser and other recipients. Vilar, they say, gets to see programme plans before anyone else and backs the operas he likes. There is a gentleman's understanding that he does not seek changes.

"Let me tell you, it's an insult, not just to me, but to the people who direct and conduct these houses," says Vilar. "If I went to Michael (Kaiser) and said I want this and that, he'd say, 'Get outta here'. There is not one documented case where I have intervened artistically. I'm too professional for that."

"Alberto is a very unusual lover of opera," says Gergiev. "He is a quiet, modest voice. There are only five Albertos in a century. I say to the people who criticise him: don't try to be too protective of opera - all that money could go elsewhere."

Soberly dressed and softly spoken, Vilar does not confine his generosity to art. He has put \$12 million into a New York hospital and \$20 million into Columbia University to attract foreign students. He reckons he can give away \$50 million a year without feeling the pinch.

The earthly rewards are his own front seats at the Met (A101-2) and Covent Garden (A8-9), where opera-goers can come up and thank him. He likes that. He also enjoys being asked to dine at Daniel Barenboim's home to discuss Berlin's beleaguered opera house. He demands recognition as a key player and is about to make a critical investment in GMN, the internet music broadcaster.

But the supreme satisfaction for Vilar is the joy of giving. "Everyone should give," he repeats. "If you only earn £30,000 a year, give £100 - it'll make you feel good."

The trouble is, not many plutocrats are following him into the

bottomless operatic pit. The oil heir Gordon Getty, he snorts, "gives peanuts". Bill Gates, whose investment rating he boosted, "is hopeless - I'm on the record as saying he is not a nice competitor. The guy didn't give away one damn penny until he was worth \$80 billion."

Governments, says Vilar, cannot afford to provide luxuries, and the European Union is demanding balanced budgets, leading to cuts in the arts. Private wealth must fill the gap. "Technology is going to be the dominant source of the growth of wealth in the next 10 years. Most people in tech have never set foot in an opera house. Are they going to give money? I'm working on it. You gotta start some place. I'm making a start."

<http://www.culturekiosque.com/opera/intervie/albertovilar.htm>